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ABSTRACT

Pomeroy House, a long-term residential treatment program in San Francisco, California, was created to help recovering alcoholic mothers and their children. Eight to 10 families stay at Pomeroy House for a minimum period of 6 months with extensions of up to 9 or 12 months, and the alcoholic mothers care for their children while recovering from alcoholism. If a mother decides to stay the later three to six months, she must be involved in school, employment, or volunteer work. Mothers and children receive group counseling, alcohol education, individual counseling, family therapy, mother-child interaction group counseling, and family and parenting classes. Alcoholic mothers and their children face many problems: (1) newly recovering mothers are often overwhelmed by guilt concerning abuse or neglect of their children while drinking; (2) alcoholism affects the health of mothers and children; (3) the recovery of mothers and children is often affected by the trauma of family violence; (4) many alcoholic women are polydrug abusers; (5) two generations of children of alcoholic parents often comprise the clients at Pomeroy House; and (6) the impoverishment of women and children is a serious problem. Abstinence alone does not guarantee happiness. Mothers who are overprotective, withdrawn and depressed, narcissistic, or aggressive and controlling need to change destructive patterns of communicating and relating to their children. The children, in turn, may have trouble relating to and trusting others, including their mother. Pomeroy House helps mothers and children learn positive interactions and experience a healthy relationship. (NB)

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POMEROY HOUSE: A RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT PROGRAM FOR RECOVERING ALCOHOLIC MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

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Pomeroy House is a long term residential treatment program created to meet the special needs of recovering alcoholic mothers and their children. Located in San Francisco and under the administration of the Women's Alcoholism Center, it addresses the recovery needs of alcoholic mothers and their children as individuals and as a family unit. Named after Florette Pomeroy, a pioneer in the field of alcoholism and women's recovery, the program serves from 8 to 10 families. It allows alcoholic mothers who are in need of residential treatment to keep and care for their children rather than choosing between recovery from alcoholism and giving up their children to foster care or relatives. Hence, both get a chance to heal simultaneously from the emotional pain and addictive behavior patterns that come from living in an alcoholic family system.

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While living in the residence, both mother and child/ren receive group counseling, alcohol education, individual counseling, family therapy, mother-child interaction group counseling, family and parenting classes. Mothers begin parenting classes aas soon as they enter the residence and continue throughout their stay. Childcare service is available to all mothers during treatment hours and for on-going support and respite. Mothers are educated about community childcare services and are expected to take

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responsibility for evening and weekend childcare needs. Pre-vocational counseling, linkage with training and educational programs, is also a crucial component of mother's treatment program.

Length of stay is a minimum of six months, with extension of up to nine or twelve months. If a mother decides to stay the later three to six months, she must be involved in school, employment, or volunteer work.

Can Mother and Child Recover Together?

Balancing the needs of mothers with the needs of their child/ren is a central goal of Pomeroy House. We believe that mothers can recover while caring for their child/ren. If you are thinking this is easier said than done, you are right. The root of the difficulty goes back to how females are socialized in this society. As children we are taught to take care of others first, especially our offspring. In order to maintain their sobriety, recovering mothers must unlearn this self-defeating way of relating to their children and others. Mothers are strongly encouraged and supported in taking time for themselves, in structuring consistent time for themselves into their daily and weekly routine. A major goal of parenting education is to teach mothers to give to themselves, to nurture themselves. We believe that mothers who model ignoring their health and personal needs are not only blocking their own growth and development but the growth and development of their children as well.

Problems Faced by Mothers and Children

Any residential program for alcoholic mothers and children must be prepared to address the myriad problems faced by this population. First, newly recovering mothers are overwhelmed by guilt due to abuse and/or neglect of their children while drinking. They attempt to over-compensate for this guilt by striving to be "perfect" mothers and insist that their children be "perfect" children. When their child/ren misbehave or express negative feelings, they fear that they are "bad" mothers and that their child/ren are irreversibly damaged. If children of alcoholic parents themselves, these mothers are even more obsessed with perfectionism and guilt over failure to meet an impossible goal. Learning to let go of guilt and to parent their children from a position of self-worth and confidence in being a "good enough" mother, not a "perfect" mother, is a crucial must for recovering alcoholic mothers. Pomeroy House's parenting class is not successful unless mothers are able to forgive themselves. Before they can understand and begin to utilize information about normal child development, their children's recovery needs, or alternative parenting techniques, they must let go of trying to prove to the world that they are "fit" mothers. As they nurture and forgive themselves and allow support and nurturing to come in from others, they can move on to parenting their children responsibly and in the present, separating their own needs from those of their children and supporting a recovery program for their children.

Second, alcoholism takes its toll on the health of both

alcoholic mothers and their children. Commonly seen are malnutrition, gastrointestinal problems, and frequent viral infections and respiratory diseases. Children are at further risk for birth defects such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and fetal alcohol effects. Immunizations may not be up to date and both mother and child may be long overdue for a medical or dental check-up. It is crucial that clients have a complete medical workup and clearance for contagious diseases befor e entering the residence. While in residence mothers need lots of assistance in following through on taking care of their medical needs and that of their children. Fear of being criticized by medical personnel for being alcoholic and neglecting their children's health may interfere with their desire to follow through on keeping medical appointments. The slightest put down by a doctor or nurse may immobilized a mother. Staff should be prepared for this reaction and be able to support and advocate for mothers, to educate medical personnel about their biases toward alcoholic mothers and its effects on the recovery of mothers and children. Developing a referral list of medical personnel who have been educated about the disease of alcoholism, and who have worked through their stereotypical beliefs and attitudes about alcoholic mothers is an important step in the planning of any residential program for recovering mothers and children.

Women and children traumatized by family violence is a third problem affecting the recovery of mothers and children. 90% of the mothers and children admitted to Pomeroy House are victims of domestic violence. My prediction is that this percentage will remain high. Researchers have estimated

domestic violence in alcholic families to be as high as 80%, with women and children as the victims!

Abused victims need help to work through the devastating effect of violence. They must be listened to, believed, and helped to understand that the abuse was not their fault. Most victims, especially children, tend to perceive their victimization as happening because of something they did wrong or because of not being good enough. This perception leads to feelings of low self-worth, depression, difficulty relating to and trusting others, isolation and extreme feelings of loneliness, difficulty expressing feelings and differentiating between feelings and action and confusion regarding appropriate signs of caring and nurturing. To recover, women and children victimized by violence need a safe and secure environment that provides them the opportunity to regain self-confidence and to experience consistent nurturing and love. In Pomeroy House violence is prohibited, including spanking. Rules governing against violence and its consequences are made clear to all clients before admission to the residence.

Fourth, although alcoholism has to be the primary disease for admission to Pomeroy House, we recognize that most alcoholic women are polydrug abusers, from prescription drugs to street drugs. One mother contends that she can not drink more than three drinks without the help of drugs to keep her drinking all night. Attendence at Alcoholics Anonymus as well as Narcotics Anonymus is strongly encouraged.

Fifth, two generations of children of alcoholic parents will

more than likely be the clients in a residential program for parents and children. Children of alcoholic parent issues will run rampant throughout the house. In Pomeroy House all of our mothers are Adult Children of Alcoholics survivals. They identify strongly with the defenses and roles taken by their children. "It's like looking at myself in the mirror," said one mother. "He's taking care of me just like I took care of my mother,"said another. "I wish I was helped to understand parental alcoholism and how I could have coped, like my son is learning today," said a third. Recovery for these mothers means going beyond abstinence once their sobriety is stabilized. Pomeroy House offers a beginning step through education about family alcoholism, and the daily experience of relearning through a consistent and nurturing environment.

Lastly, the impoverishment of women and children is a serious problem in this society. Seventy-five percent of people living at or below poverty level are women and children. The number of homeless mothers and children living on the streets of our inner-cities is increasing every day. Most alcoholic women have been abandoned by their spouses, and a majority of these women are mothers. If child support or alimony is awarded after a divorce, payments are infrequent or not collectable. Ex-spouses or lovers are often alcoholic or drug addicts and are incapable of providing consistent financial support. Aid to Families with Dependent Children is the most stable form of economic support alcoholic mothers can depend on. If working, most are under-employed and having difficulty meeting the needs

of their families. Paying the full fee for treatment is virtually impossible for the alcoholic mother. Pomeroy House planners recognized this fact and developed the residence to serve and support low-income families. Advocating to help mothers obtain gainful employment and improved vocational skills is an important part of Pomeroy House's treatment program.

Mending the Mother-Child Relationship

Abstinence does not guarantee a life of happiness ever after. As one mother put it, "When I stopped drinking and came into Pomeroy House I thought my child and I would now be the perfect family, all loving and happy. Boy, was I surprised! We soon learned we have a lot of work to do on our relationship." The emotional bond between alcoholic mothers and their children have been severely impaired by alcoholism. Re-establishing this bond is no easy task. Resistance to changing addictive behavioral interactions and survival defenses place alcoholics and their family members at risk for remaining in a so called "dry drunk" existence and at great risk for relapse. Helping mothers and children to change destructive patterns of communicating and relating begins as soon as they enter Pomeroy House. Four destructive maternal responses noted by staff are:

1. The overprotective mother who tries to keep her child from separating tends to grieve the loss of her child's babyhood. She often tries to recapture these years through clinging to her youngest child.

2. The withdrawn, depressed mother who has low self-esteem

and low self-confidence in her ability to parent her child will give up her parental role easily and allow her child to make decisions, to take control. She is often told what to do by a very demanding and angry child. Her child complains of feeling unloved and ignored by his/her mother.

3. The narcissistic mother who needs her child to satisfy her own emotional needs for approval and self-worth has very high expectations of her child, often beyond his/her developmental capabilities. She has difficulty empathizing with her child and any demands placed on her by her child are too over-whelming. The child of such a mother has to be a "perfect" child, a -gifted child or an adult-like child who puts no demands on the mother. This child is at risk for abuse if too needy.

4. The aggressive, severely controlling mother who tends to have difficulty moving out of power struggles with her child is often harsh and abusive in disciplining her child. Physical punishment, spanking, is the most relied upon disciplinary technique. Other techniques are seen as too lenient, ineffective, and too slow. These mothers want immediate obedience from their children. Any sign of misbehavior is seen as a willful act against mother's authority.

What about the children? What part do they play in this relationship? Like adult children of alcoholic parents, the young children have difficulty relating to and trusting others, including their newly sober mother. They dare not

give up their survival defenses just becauses mother is no longer drinking. They have more than likely experienced many relapses by their alcoholic parent and will not be so quick to let mother be in charge. Some even liked the drunk mother better because she may have been a very permissive parent during the drinking years, plus it's hard to give up the power experienced from having to be in charge of their lives and possibly the lives of their brothers and sisters as well. In the residence where spanking is not allowed, some children will attempt to take advantage of their mother and test her to the breaking point. This is when mothers need support from staff and other mothers to step out of the power struggle with their children. Children need special help to unlearn alcoholic and co-alcoholic behaviors that will follow them into adulthood. Like their alcoholic mothers, they need an individualized and separate treatment program designed to meet their special recovery needs.

Both mothers and children can remain caught in a web of hampered growth and development if not given an opportunity to unlearn faulty communication and survival roles needed while growing up in an alcoholic family system. Pomeroy House allows mothers and children to learn positive interactions and to experience the rewards of a healthy relationship. Through parenting classes the mothers learn about normal child development, effective parent-child communication and non-abusive disciplinary techniques. The classes allow them a safe forum to process their guilt and fears as they make the transition to becoming sober and responsible parents.

Through the mother-child interaction groups mothers and children are helped to put into paractice effective behavioral interactions and communication via activities designed to strengthen the emotional bond and trust between mothers and their children. Daily support and examples of effective parenting are modeled by specially trained residential managers.

Helping alcoholic mothers and their children to heal from the devastating effects of alcoholism is the major goal of Pomeroy House. The individual needs of both mothers and children are met separately, while the family works on changing destructive alcoholic family dynamics on a daily basis in an environment that lends consistent nurturance and support.